

ANALYSIS

“Greenleaf” (1956)

Flannery O’Connor

(1925-1964)

“As she lies dead, impaled on the horns of a bull, the proud and willful Mrs. May, who had vowed to herself that she would die only when she got ‘good and ready,’ has the look of a person ‘whose sight had been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.’ Mrs. May, like many of the O’Connor widow-divorcees, has really thought to justify herself by works. (‘Before any kind of judgment seat, she would be able to say: I’ve worked, I have not wallowed.’) And certainly as things in this world go, she seems far superior to the feckless poor-white Greenleaf family who work on her farm, especially Mrs. Greenleaf, who indulges in a particularly repulsive form of ‘prayer healing.’ (‘I’m afraid your wife has let religion warp her, she said once tactfully to Mr. Greenleaf. ‘Everything in moderation, you know.’) But, Miss O’Connor implies, religion is not for ‘moderates’; it *does* warp one—away from the ways of this world. And the final irony remains that it is the hardworking but prideful Mrs. May who is really warped. And it is such *hubris* [pride] which appears the cardinal sin in Miss O’Connor’s works.”

Robert Drake

Flannery O’Connor

(William B. Eerdmans 1966) 28

“The ‘Southern gothic’ tone is as authentically felt as in most of the stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.... ‘Greenleaf’ affords a very natural bridge between the two collections of Flannery O’Connor’s stories. The ingredients of revivalism and violence are a functional part of the narrative.... The story moves slowly until the very end when it erupts in sudden and unexpected violence. The ending clearly favors the ‘grotesque’ as it turns on a simple but rather dreadful stroke of irony.”

Melvin J. Friedman

The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O’Connor

eds. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson

(Fordham 1966, 1977) 18

“‘Greenleaf’ is constructed around the story’s symbol of God, a scrub bull... The violent action ending the story takes place in ‘a green arena, encircled almost entirely by woods,’ and the emphasis on greenness is indicated in the name of the main character, Mrs. May...one of O’Connor’s practical people, a believer in salvation through works. Like her socially inferior counterpart in the story, Mrs. Greenleaf...Mrs. May is obsessed with the evil and unjust nature of the world, specifically the superiority of the hired man Greenleaf’s children to her own and, more immediately, the Greenleaf twins’ bull which is contaminating her own herd and ruining her yard and fences. The bull represents the injustices of her life, the indignities which she has suffered.

Being killed by it at the end of the story is the final indignity suffered at the hands of the Greenleafs of the world, but it is also the indignity which opens her eyes to the nature of the world—the realization that what she construes as injustice is part of the scheme God has prepared for man and part of the inheritance of fallen man... Mrs. May’s epiphany as she dies on the bull’s horns is...her recognition of its inevitability.... Her acceptance of death and her recognition of its meaning redeem her vices.... She accepts her fate as a final injustice of the world, not different in kind from the other injustices which she has been subject to.... Mrs. May comes to understand the injustices of the world as an aspect of the condition of man, not as a personal affront.... Her character finally is equal to the ultimate injustice of death.... The bull...symbolizes the justice of God in its destructiveness and the love of Christ in its function of saving Mrs. May by revealing the truth to her.”

Carter W. Martin

The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor

(Vanderbilt 1968) 147-48, 182, 231-32

“A virtuous, hard-working widow much like Mrs. McIntyre [“The Displaced Person”] (she too operates a dairy farm), suffers indignity and death as a result of lower-class shiftlessness.... Mrs. May has two sons who apparently despise her and each other, and she is clearly envious of her hired man, Mr. Greenleaf, whose sons have risen to prosperity through the kind of hard work her sons scorn. One of her sons is an embittered intellectual and the other is a ‘nigger insurance man’.... Mrs. May’s worst fear has been that she will die and the Greenleafs will acquire her property through her sons’ default: they will prove incapable of handling the shiftless, conniving tenant family. Her desire for vindictive and immediate ‘justice’ leads to her death and its concomitant revelation....

Miss O’Connor has imbued the bull in her story with both pagan and Christian significance.... The scrub bull...serves to reveal the fatuity of her pretended superiority and her concern with material values.... Mrs. May’s vengeful determination to make Greenleaf shoot his sons’ bull comes after he has witnessed her own sons’ violent, hateful squabbling.... The ‘patient god come down to woo’ Mrs. May is associated also with the suffering Christ, for the line of trees behind the bull looks like a ‘dark wound’; her recovery of sight makes clear that in the convergence of death—occurring, incredibly, on the horns of the bull she had intended to have destroyed—Mrs. May has risen above secular pride.... [Her] ironically appropriate death and the hint of her vision which transcends respectability offer her only hope.”

Leon V, Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O’Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 125, 133-34

“Mrs. May is hardly an intellectual.... She is quite similar to the philistine women... She is a farm owner only by necessity, since she had to move to the country when her husband died.... Being industrious and self-possessed, she has made the best of her lot, struggling to keep the place intact for her ungrateful sons; but her managing seems more like running a business than working a farm. Far from taking Mrs. Hopewell’s [“Good Country People”] interest in the bodily functions of her cows, Mrs. May tries to maintain gentility and an efficient aloofness. In doing so, she reveals a basic spiritual inadequacy that (as with Hulga [“Good Country People”] and Asbury [“The Enduring Chill”]) is inseparable from her compulsive disdain for the body.

Her sexual repressions are revealed mostly through her relations with the runaway scrub bull that has invaded her farm and that threatens to ruin her herd. The bull is presented repeatedly as an irrepressible sexual force: ‘He likes to bust loose’ from the pens in which he is put; he smashes into a pickup truck; and, as he grazes under Mrs. May’s window at night, he seems like an ‘uncouth country suitor’ or a ‘patient god’ that has come to woo her. Moreover, the bull belongs to O. T. and E. T. Greenleaf, the hired man’s sons, whom Mrs. May considers ‘scrub human’ trash but who, nevertheless, continue to thrive and grow richer while she struggles to stay genteel. The Greenleaf boys, who resemble Faulkner’s second and third generation Snopeses, are long-legged, raw-boned, red-skinned farmers with ‘bright grasping fox-colored eyes.’ They are virile, shrewd, and coarse, the suitable owners of the intruding bull.

In contrast, Mrs. May’s sons suggest the end of a thinning family stock. Scofield, unmarried at thirty-six, has a broad, pleasant, smiling face and sells ‘nigger-insurance’ because there is more money in it than in any other kind. Wesley, who had rheumatic fever at seven and must eat a salt-free diet, is a bitter ‘intellectual,’ who teaches at a nearby college he scorns and talks about traveling but, like most of Miss O’Connor’s inert intellectuals, never leaves home. Neither of the boys will have anything to do with cows, let alone the scrub bull. Mrs. May, however, must finally face the bull.

As she drives into the fields with Mr. Greenleaf so that he can kill the bull, she feels exhilarated, in part because he is doing what she wants, because she is going to get even with the Greenleafs, and because she will get rid of a main symbol of her troubles, but also because, as she exclaims, ‘spring is here,’ a springtime that, reinforced by the names ‘May’ and ‘Greenleaf,’ suggests a reawakened fertility. The story reaches its climax as she is gored by the bull, who gallops out of the dark woods...and then buries his head in her lap, ‘like a wild tormented lover.’ Despite her attempts to suppress whatever she finds coarse in nature, she cannot will out of existence this uncouth suitor...

There is also much in the story to indicate that the bull is symbolically divine...a force from above as well as from within. Outside her window he is likened to a 'patient god'; his horns seem wreathed by bits of torn hedge; and he is several times associated with the sun, once clearly suggesting a divine manifestation... Above all, the ending implies unmistakably a religious revelation; after she was gored, 'she continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable'....

Mrs. May's religious and sexual attitudes are frequently associated. The narrator explains that 'she thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom.' Jesus and sexuality are permissible only under tight limits of decorum, because Mrs. May does not believe seriously in either but is disturbed by both. Shame of the spirit and shame of the body are here two similar consequences of her bourgeois gentility. Later she says to her sons, 'I don't like to hear you boys make jokes about religion.... If you would go to church, you would meet some nice girls.' Here she not only associates religion and sexuality, but she shows that she has almost managed to reduce both of them to harmlessly useful social concerns; meeting nice girls in church—nominal Christianity and nominal sexuality. Behind them Mrs. May's prattle is the terrible fact that her view of existence has been forcibly narrowed to a safe, civilized mediocrity that cannot accommodate impulses from spirit or id; and in denying man's kinship with animals and with God, she is intent upon making him into a predictable and dull machine. (In fact, while she scorns the Greenleafs' religion and virility, she envies O. T. and E. T. for their farm machinery, particularly their milking machines.)

With such associations established, the use of the bull as the main symbol becomes complex, not just manifold, but truly complex. Very likely the Bull-God is intended to suggest Zeus and, by extension, a manifestation of God; perhaps in this respect he even connotes Christ as the bridegroom and the wreathed sacrificial victim, although the connections here become tenuous. Yet, in what must be ironic contrast to these symbolic meanings, the bull also suggests the object of Dionysian worship... Since Mrs. May has so rigidly repressed her sexual and animal being, she experiences sexuality as erotic destruction; since she has so intently ignored God, she is racked by an unendurable light of revelation and by a purifying love that must destroy the old self.

The violent experience is necessary to help break the defenses, but it is not therefore to be seen as an ideal state in itself.... She...experiences revelation through a demonic form: she becomes aware of God through a symbolic, Dionysian immolation of her self, which is not to say that such immolation is a Christian ideal any more than being pierced by a bull is an ideal form of sexual behavior. Such patterns of reaction also help to explain why Miss O'Connor so often uses satanic instruments to enlighten her characters: she is not only showing that God moves in mysterious ways and brings good out of evil; she is also exploring the psychological and religious view that demonic characters experience God's mercy through demonic structures that oppose or caricature their own forms of idolatry....

Mrs. Greenleaf [is]...a central antithesis to Mrs. May. The hired man's wife is a superstitious prayer healer; she cuts morbid stories out of the newspapers, buries them in the woods, and prays, rolls, and groans over them for an hour or so. Her yard looks like a dump, and her five daughters are filthy and dip snuff. Mrs. Greenleaf is definitely trash. Moreover, her prayer healing is clearly associated with sexual drives, which further underscores the association of religion and sexuality in Mrs. May.... One of her healings in the woods symbolically and psychologically unites the main themes of the story: "'Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!" Mrs. Greenleaf shrieked. "Jesus, stab me in the heart!" and she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mount, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth.' The religious frenzy, the sexual images, the attempt to merge with the object of worship, the longing for death—all are fused in an orgiastic rite, anticipating the final scene in which the bull literally stabs Mrs. May in the heart. While Mrs. Greenleaf is spiritually more vital than Mrs. May, the former's faith is still corrupted by the demonic qualities that make it grotesque."

David Eggenschwiler
The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor
(Wayne State 1972) 60-65

“A woman experiences the intrusion of a sense of mystery upon her life at the moment of her death.... What O’Connor is dramatizing...is an image of the discovery of the mystery of Reality, and the language in which that discovery is portrayed suggests an association with the coming of Christ to the unsuspecting Mrs. May... The tone of the story, meanwhile, is governed by a carefully modulated comic control, whereby seemingly gratuitous violence is subsumed under a vision of order.

The protagonist, Mrs. May, is a hard-headed, hard-beset woman who runs a farm; her greatest fear in life is that her property will eventually devolve upon the Greenleafs (Mr. Greenleaf is a hired hand on the farm)—that they, and not her own sons, will prosper and endure. Mrs. Greenleaf is a woman obsessed with Jesus and, as a figure of abstract misery, she is a foil to the complacent Mrs. May....In its down-to-earth suffering and self-humiliation [her] image of devotion...looks back to Hazel Motes’s ascetic rituals in *Wise Blood*... [Mrs. May] ‘thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom.’ And her presumptuous complacency is brought out on a still larger scale later on in the story, when...she is made to imagine crying out to her sons, ‘You’ll find out one of these days, you’ll find out what *Reality* is when it’s too late!’ The particular manner of Mrs. May’s own discovery of ‘*Reality*’ is of course the true subject of the story....

She thinks of Mr. Greenleaf: perhaps he has been gored by the bull. And the irony of that catastrophe pleases her—‘as if she had hit on the perfect ending for a story she was telling her friend.’ In a moment, however, we move from Mrs. May’s ironic viewpoint—herself the superior onlooker—to a description (still through her eyes) of the bull’s charge toward her; but the ironic vantage point shifts to the reader.... It is a shocking climax, but what adds to our surprise is the amorous language in which it is described. And yet, the ‘wild tormented lover’ who joyously sinks his horns into her chest has been courting Mrs. May throughout the story; and the imputation of a conscious design in his final charge has the curious effect of increasing the sense of an inescapable, painful destiny...

The metaphorical significance of the bull is first intimated early in the story through Mrs. May’s first half-understood dream: sleeping, she hears it eating the shrubbery outside her window...‘eating everything but the Greenleafs.’ The bull’s alliance with the Greenleafs (and with Jesus) is subsequently reinforced when Mrs. May remembers Mrs. Greenleaf groaning, ‘Jesus! Jesus!’ and the sound of it is ‘so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her.’ Mrs. Greenleaf’s own groaning receptivity to the violence is made clear when she shrieks, ‘Oh Jesus, stab me in the heart!’ All of this of course ironically foreshadows the final scene...

What makes ‘Greenleaf’ convincing, finally, is the rich psychological dimension of the characterization: the various dreams, half-perceptions, fears, and anticipations of Mrs. May validate...the theological meaning.... O’Connor’s best tales usually cannot be reduced to some specific theological formula—that would be to do less than justice to the weight of complexity they bear. Rather, they culminate in an image that is true dramatically, psychologically, and morally. With O’Connor, as with other writers of firm belief (Dante, for example), the unassailable dramatic image is closer to the vision than any doctrinal equivalent.”

Miles Orvell
Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O’Connor
(Temple U 1972) 23-27

“The true cultural grotesques are the invariably well-mannered members of the community who ignore the spiritual foundations of the culture. Miss O’Connor sees the South as struggling to preserve this spiritual identity, not only against the Raybers and the Sheppards, but also against those numerous members of the community who substitute sanctimoniousness for true Christian virtue. This insight applies well to...Mrs. May in ‘Greenleaf,’ to Mrs. McIntyre in ‘The Displaced Person,’ to Mrs. Cope in ‘A Circle in the Fire,’ and to Mrs. Turpin in ‘Revelation.’ These women traipse their fields, pastures, and woods with a single-minded sense of righteous proprietorship that prevents them from recognizing a fundamentally spiritual estrangement from their surroundings, an estrangement rooted in their inability to act charitably toward their neighbors. Unaware of their alienation, these ordinary individuals are extremely vulnerable to extraordinary events which test their harshness and rigidity of spirit....

Mrs. May obviously disdains the low origins and primitive ways of the Greenleafs as well as their newly acquired success. With their fox-colored eyes and dark crafty faces they seem to be cast in the mold of Faulkner's tenacious Snopes clan. Yet the Greenleafs, as their name implies, are in basic harmony with Nature. More importantly Mrs. Greenleaf embraces a variety of worship which is reminiscent of early mystery religions based on vegetation and on earth. Her mortification and ecstasy, which are appalling to Mrs. May, are ways of experiencing the spiritual through Nature; moreover, Mrs. Greenleaf thinks in terms of a primitive salvation for mankind. Mrs. May's failure to understand the rituals which Mrs. Greenleaf enacts before her eyes signifies the modern failure to integrate religious mystery with culture. It also explains why Mrs. May's destiny of necessity must be violent, because hers is the fate of the individual who is estranged from the basic forces of the community and from grace.

Another indication of evil in 'Greenleaf' is the alienation which exists among the members of the May family. Estrangement within the family is of course one of the most common forms of sublimated violence and overt feuding in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. In 'Greenleaf' Mrs. May's two sons loathe their mother and hate each other as well. Wesley, the younger of the brothers, bears spiritual kinship to Hulga ["Good Country People"], Asbury ["The Enduring Chill"], and other effete intellectuals who are encountered frequently in Miss O'Connor's stories. He is sickly, sardonic, ill-natured, and rude—a vacuous academician consumed by a brutal sense of determinism. Scofield is much coarser than his brother; patterned after Jason Compson [*The Sound and the Fury*, by Faulkner], he displays a marked degeneracy in his manners. Both brothers are perversely preoccupied with their mother's death, and this fact suggests how individuals can consciously choose to perform or to wish acts of evil....

The bull...throughout the story is depicted as a deity and a lover...reinforced by landscape images which convey destructive potential. This landscape, distilled into the primary image of the sun, is, like the bull, anathema to Mrs. May.... Mrs. May had the sensation 'that the sun was directly on top of her head, like a silver bullet ready to drop into her brain.' That night she has yet another dream in which, while striding across her farm, she hears the noise of the sun, and in this dream the images of the sun and of the bull merge.... Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. She woke up with her hand over her mouth and the same noise, diminished but distinct, in her ear. It was the bull munching something under the window.' Here is a direct analogy between the bull and another procreative force, indeed the primal one, the sun. But a fundamental opposition exists between Mrs. May and the creative forces of Nature, which she regards as hostile and threatening....

Mrs. May...refuses to admit to any estrangement from Nature; she merely wants the destructive bull off her property. Thus she constantly misinterprets her alienation, and fails to perceive the hidden violence of her surroundings, so when she drives out with Mr. Greenleaf, her tenant, to shoot the bull: 'Birds were screaming everywhere, the grass was almost too bright to look at, the sky was an even, piercing blue. "'Spring is here," she said gaily.' In fact Nature, heightened and hostile, conspires against Mrs. May, for she is a threat to it. When, for instance, she sees the bull—the symbol of the magical and mystical forces of Nature—grazing peacefully among the cows, she immediately sends Mr. Greenleaf to shoot him, intent as she is on disrupting the natural environment.

The conclusion of 'Greenleaf,' enacting a macabre conjugal union between bull and Mrs. May, is perfect in its archetypal resolutions. Confronted with destruction and (ambiguously) with a penetration that is explicitly sexual, Mrs. May becomes yet another character who is forced out to meet the extremities of her nature. Both she and her gentleman lover 'die' together, for Mr. Greenleaf rushes up and shoots the bull in the eye just after he gores Mrs. May. As in many primitive myths, which Miss O'Connor knew from her close reading of Erich Neumann, opposition between male and female forces is reconciled, for Mrs. May is literally embedded in Nature at the end of the story. Yet her archetypal fate serves as a model for those who reject their origins in Nature and who are insensitive to the spiritual forces which operate within the community."

Gilbert H. Muller

Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 46, 82-84, 87-88

“The Mays and their hired help, the Greenleafs, represent the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ South.... With hard work and government aid, the Greenleaf family—the ‘new South’—is rising economically, will rise socially, and will eventually displace the Mays, complacent middle-class Southerners....

The shadow of death darkens the story from the opening words; it takes the form of a scrub bull belonging to the Greenleaf boys. The bull is both the central figure in the story and a complex symbol of the encounter with the divine which is death.... The bull instigates all the action.... Symbolically, the bull first appears as a god...‘like some patient god come down to woo’ Mrs. May.... Her last view of him before she closes the blind shows her that ‘the wreath slipped down to the base of his horns where it looked like a menacing prickly crown’....part of the hedge which he has ripped loose.... To the Christian, this imagery suggests the God-man, Christ, at the hour of his passion and death....

The next night her dream is again inspired by the bull crunching underneath her window.... The sun...becomes ‘narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the treeline and raced down the hill toward her.’ The dream presages the manner of her death, when the bull, his head lowered, ‘raced toward her’.... Her death is foreshadowed more subtly in another scene which links the charging of the bull with the unseen action of grace.... Walking one day on a wooded path through her property, she was startled by a ‘guttural agonized voice’ groaning ‘Jesus, Jesus!’.... The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her.’ She discovered Mrs. Greenleaf ‘sprawled on her hands and knees on the side of the road,’ praying for the victims of all the calamities of the day, accounts of which she had cut from the newspapers to bury under her in the dirt. The ‘violent unleashed force’—which Mrs. Greenleaf was summoning and Mrs. May felt instinctively—was the force of grace, but the imagery of the sentence links it with a charging bull. This similarity suggests the presence of grace when the bull actually charges....

Mrs. May has effectively cut herself off from her religious heritage, even though this alienation is not immediately apparent. ‘She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true.’ Mrs. Greenleaf embraces in one gesture the suffering world and the source of its healing. Shrieking “‘Jesus, stab me in the heart,” she falls in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth.’ Who is to say which woman is more grotesque?... The story itself gives evidence that a fanatical expression of a true belief in God may be more productive of good than a complacent self-deification which cloaks nonbelief. Mrs. May’s two sons are selfish bachelors who demean their professions, quarrel with each other, and plague their mother. Wesley ‘would not milk a cow to save [his mother’s] soul from hell,’ and Scofield exasperated her beyond endurance.’ On the other hand, the Greenleaf boys each have a wife and three children, run a flourishing farm, and, according to a Negro helper, ‘They never quarls’...

She drives the car to the center of the pasture, a position which precludes any escape. She sits on the front bumper of the car, forgetful of Mr. Greenleaf’s words about the bull: ‘He don’t like cars and trucks’... In...‘freezing disbelief’ she dies, with ‘the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.’ When Mr. Greenleaf reaches her, she seems to be ‘bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear.’ The two sentences describing her look and her position produce an unsettling ambiguity... The first suggests the illumination of grace and her rejection of it; the second—softer in diction and tone—may indicate that the ‘last discovery’ unfolded God’s ultimate mercy.”

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O’Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 94-98

“[One] category of the grotesque in O’Connor’s works consists...of those types typically classified as ‘normal.’ The aberrations of this group generally pass unnoticed by society because they themselves *are* society. They are the everyday, middle-class majority who dominate O’Connor’s world; these people, neither flagrant sinners nor striking saints, drift along in the blithe assumption that they represent the ‘good’ aspects of mankind. Their ‘sins’ remain undiscovered by themselves and the world until a major trauma effects exposure, ruin, or salvation. Their initial fault is a lack of faith: ‘She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true’ (‘Greenleaf’).

Their zealous dedication to *things*—to the operation of a farm, to purchase of machinery, to property and profit—is interpreted by them as evidence of pious Christian industry, not avarice. The nagging grandmothers, the driving widows, the complaining sons—these are ‘grotesques’ if they are set against any ideal pattern. But we are so accustomed to these familiar types that we fail to perceive their deformities until we are forced to observe them at close hand and to listen with full attention....

Mrs. May...shares many obvious affinities with...Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Hopewell, and Mrs. McIntyre—a widow trying desperately to manage a rather makeshift farm in order to provide for herself and her dependents. Like the other widows, she is plagued by irresponsible help whom she must cannily supervise in order to hold the operation together. She too feels that the world at large is in conspiracy against her. Her employees, the forces of Nature, her family—all are threats to her well-being; only through her own shrewd perspicacity is she able to outwit the destructive elements which surround her and to eke out her survival.... Her determined efforts to survive lead her to an obsessive concern with the world of things—her personal possessions, the land, the stock, and the tools essential to the operation of the farm. Although she is outwardly a religious conformist, inwardly she rejects all binding spiritual commitment....

The consequence of her narrow concern for her own immediate welfare is a lack of compassion for those about her. She views her hired man as an instrument, a *thing* like the farm machines, whose sole function is to contribute to her own welfare. She bears with his insolence and continuing inefficiency ...because she feels she has no real choice. Along with her excessive devotion to her ‘property,’ Mrs. May suffers from an acute sense of her own superiority; she scorns the Greenleaf family as obvious white trash. The entire family communicates in...sub-English peculiar to themselves; their children are dirty; and Mrs. Greenleaf senior dips snuff and engages in orgiastic ceremonies of ‘prayer healing’.... Mrs. May is convinced of the superiority of her own two sons, Wesley and Scofield, to the Greenleaf twins... Although they are in their thirties, neither son shows any inclination to accept the responsibilities of a wife and independent household, nor do they contribute to the management of their mother’s farm.

The Greenleaf boys, by contrast, are obviously on their way up...Thus, in the two families we have near allegorical types of the Old and New South.... The Greenleafs are the Snopeses of the postwar world, and, like Faulkner’s tribe, they are unstoppable in the rise to power. The Greenleafs are in the ascendant because they possess the vitality and imagination which have disappeared from the ‘respectable’ classes. In a dismal premonition, Mrs. May foresees the future consequences: in twenty years, the Greenleafs will have become ‘society’....

Mrs. May’s death, like that of Mr. Guizac...can be attributed to many but assigned to no one in particular. The guilt extends to her indolent sons, who refuse to share the responsibility for the bull just as they refuse to help with any of the work on the farm; to the indifferent Greenleaf twins, who leave the harried widow to cope with the consequences of their neglect; and to the uncooperative hired man, who arrives too late to save the hapless victim....The death itself is presented in the imagery of lover and beloved. When Mrs. May had first noted the bull in her yard, he had stood in the moonlight ‘like some patient god come down to woo her.’ When he discovers her in the midst of the field, he gallops toward her ‘with a gay almost rocking gait as if he were overjoyed to find her again.’ And when the bull attacks her, he buries ‘his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover’....

The Greenleaf bull...becomes, in one sense, the executor of a ‘divine’ sentence. Mrs. May, like others in the long catalogue of O’Connor ‘victims,’ is struck down as if in retribution for her lifelong dedication to blinding pride. More immediately, he becomes, by links of ownership, the instrument of Greenleaf vengeance against a hardhearted exploiter. The bull is Greenleaf property, and his abrupt annihilation of Mrs. May prefigures the Greenleaf takeover of a world traditionally dominated by ‘Mays.’ The demise of Mrs. May strongly suggests, therefore, the radical social transformation currently at work in the South.... Her face in death is full of discovery, of awareness of her own vulnerability, and of the triumph of the Greenleafs.... She assumes ‘the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable’.”

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O’Connor
(Twayne 1973) 31, 117, 136-40

“The scrub bull eating away at Mrs. May’s substance is an incarnation both of a changing social order and of divine revelation.... The action of the bull in ‘Greenleaf’...is so smoothly assimilated into the inevitable process of social change typified by the Greenleafs and the fictional elements themselves are so carefully interwoven into the story’s hermeneutic pattern that this may well be O’Connor’s most effective use of natural symbolism....

The textual allusions to the Greenleaf bull as divine lover have been carefully exposed by the critics.... The threat to her security is clear from the outset. Its destructive presence in her hedge, as ‘a steady rhythmic chewing as if something were eating one wall of the house,’ even filters through her senses in her sleep. The bull belongs of course to O. T. and E. T. Greenleaf, who through their government-financed education, marriage, housing, and ‘milk parlor’ are about to inherit the land—from Mrs. May. She dreams that the chewing continues ‘through the house, eating her and the boys...eating everything until nothing was left but the Greenleafs on a little island all their own in the middle of what had been her place.’

But at the story’s conclusion the Greenleaf bull has ‘eaten’ only Mrs. May; she alone is responsible for hastening the capitulation of the Mays to the advancing order of Greenleafs. She has had her property entailed so that her sons could not leave it to their wives if they married (she was convinced that as soon as she died they would ‘marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything’), for Wesley and Scofield had already proven to her that ‘neither of them cared what happened to the place.’

The war of words between Mrs. May and Mr. Greenleaf demonstrates how one who must invariably have the last word is fittingly judged by the sharp retorts of her own proud tongue.... Mrs. May predictably pronounces her own last judgment (and ours) while Mrs. Greenleaf’s prayer prophetically foreshadows the manner of Mrs. May’s death. When Mrs. Greenleaf shrieks, ‘Oh, Jesus, stab me in the heart!’ while seeming to embrace the ground, her fundamentalist piety begs for the grace of healing. It is Mrs. May, however, who experiences the literal answer to that prayer when her heart is pierced by one of the bull’s horns and embraced by the other. In reacting to Mrs. Greenleaf’s pentecostal excesses, Mrs. May had tactlessly reminded Mr. Greenleaf, ‘Everything in moderation, you know’—an admonition she would have done well to have remembered when she launched her monomaniacal campaign against the Greenleaf bull. She is the victim of the bull’s irresistible attraction to cars, but more precisely of her own refusal to allow anyone or anything—even history and least of all God—to alter her view of reality....

Mrs. May stands condemned most precisely by the indictment that she had wanted to shout at her shiftless sons, ‘You’ll find out one of these days, you’ll find out what *Reality* is when it’s too late!’ She at least finds out ‘what *Reality* is’ even if it is too late. And what was undoubtedly her rashest and saddest miscalculation was formulated by her own ‘defiant’ inner voice: ‘I’ll die when I get good and ready.’ The structure of reality is certainly not determined by the works and attitudes of man.”

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O’Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 97-101

“What particular version of reality has this woman seen, ironically, when ‘it’s too late?’... Mrs. May is afraid of white ‘trash’ surpassing her social status through their own industry. This sense of victimization, the feeling of self-pity occasioned by profligate offspring, extends beyond her conflict with the Greenleafs (‘Everything is against you,’ she would say....)... The bull acts as a catalyst for Mrs. May’s most deep-seated anxieties; he activates the woman’s fear of defeat by some force that will destroy everything *except* the Greenleafs.... It is not, then, a generalized phobia, but a fear that arises out of Mrs. May’s tendency to see life in terms of conflict between family and family....

The end of the Greenleaf story dramatizes, in effect, the protagonist’s encounter with what represents her fears. In a final sense, Mrs. May is the victim of irrational force, overcome by it even as she fantasizes about subduing her antagonist, whom she still perceives to be the Greenleaf family. Her fantasy of the bull killing the hired man is essentially a dream of herself triumphant over all that the Greenleafs represent to her, and the irony is, of course, apparent. It is Mrs. May who succumbs.... Calling the bull an agent of destruction and the catalyst for Mrs. May’s awakening is totally different from contending that the bull is

an example of spirit incarnate in flesh, a symbol of grace. Revelation of supreme and final human vulnerability is not solely a lesson of Christian theology.” [This critic is an agnostic unable to tolerate the religious content of the story.]

Carol Shloss

Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference
(LSU 1980) 65-73

“The intensely practical farm types labor until they can discern nothing more than ‘the reflection of [their] own character[s]’.... Although the language of love that O'Connor borrows from the mystics and the Song of Songs identifies Mrs. May as the bride of Christ, it is a role she fatally resists.... Mrs. May...finds her sudden blast of vision literally unbearable... It is the bull's violent embrace that leads to the unbearable opening of Mrs. May's eyes. Everywhere the raw contact with physical actuality, an affirmation of the senses, precipitates the onset of awareness of the divine.... The cost of Mrs. May's revelation measures the fullness of her denial.”

Frederick Asals

Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 66, 209, 222-23

“Greenleaf”...was one of the author's most widely honored stories in its day. Still set in the insular world of a southern country home and farm, as yet threatened only by the upward mobility of a low-class white dairyman and his family, ‘Greenleaf’ revolved around a figure not unfamiliar in O'Connor's work: a self-satisfied but sorely pressed middle-aged widow struggling to keep order on her ‘place’ amid an assortment of human elements who seem bent on destroying all her earthbound accomplishments and hopes. In Mrs. May's case, these include two irresponsible sons who torture her, and the family of Mr. Greenleaf, her shiftless and devious dairyman. Countering her own spoiled heirs are the two sons of Greenleaf, who are as peaceful, hard-working and effective as hers are quarrelsome and unproductive. Countering the stiff-backed and materialistic owner is Mrs. Greenleaf, a vast and slovenly ‘mystic’ who occupies her time with what she calls prayer healing.

This repulsive figure is quixotically allotted a more important part to play in what follows than the grotesquely comic one she at first suggests, for she, too, is a prophetess of sorts, and foretells the coming climax in a prayer howled during one of her sessions. ‘You have to take virtue where you find it,’ Flannery O'Connor might have said, and meant it. A nonhuman element of threat has now appeared in the form of a scrub bull belonging to the Greenleaf sons, which has been allowed to run loose on Mrs. May's farm, endangering her milk herd and destroying her rest by his nocturnal vigils under her bedroom window, where he chews noisily on her shrubbery. This figure for the pursuing Christ seems at most to revert to Greek mythology and the earthly visits of Zeus to mortals he desires. But when the bull is described as ‘crowned’ with a hedge-wreath ripped loose and encircling his horns, suggesting a crown of thorns, his interest in Mrs. May takes on a deeper aspect, and it appears that the presence of a waiting Christ is figured not as ‘Christ the Tiger,’ but as a scrawny bull standing under her window, ‘chewing calmly like an uncouth country suitor.’

At the same time, on the surface level of the story, he is simply a troublesome stray bull, and Mrs. May is determined to get rid of him. Her outrage is compounded when she learns who owns him, and finds that the father is therefore reluctant to carry out her orders to kill the animal. She gets her way, and he is destroyed, but not before he, approaching her ‘like a wild, tormented lover,’ has had his way with her as well. The story is in O'Connor's best vein, one she had perfected: grimly comic, but mysterious and terrifying at the same time.”

Sally Fitzgerald

Introduction

Three by Flannery O'Connor
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xxv-xxvi

Michael Hollister (2016)